

Teaching Poetry in a Kenyan Refugee Camp: Trinity University English professor spends summer sharing what she loves in an unlikely place

By Jenny Browne

*Who hears me when I don't speak? Where do you die when there is no ground?* The Somali teenager read the questions from his paper carefully. I'd asked these secondary school students who live in Kenya's Dadaab Refugee Camp to do a warm-up poetry exercise in the mode of Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions*, so generating paradoxical queries was the point. And I felt grateful that a direct response wasn't expected as teaching poetry here left me holding exponentially more questions than answers.

Established by the United Nations in 1991, Dadaab was initially designed to hold some 90,000 refugees who fled after the breakdown of the Somali government. Twenty years later, Somalia remains unstable, and despite official closure of the Kenyan border in January of 2007, some 200,000 more crossed the 50 miles of bandit-ridden desert to Dadaab. Persistent drought and violence by Al Shabab militants have made residents of a troubled region desperate. In early 2010, Dadaab averaged 5,000 new arrivals monthly. By the time of my visit in June, that number had tripled. As of mid-July, 386,299 people officially live inside Dadaab, with another 60,000 squatting on the outskirts. How do some 400,000 people live in a space designed for 90,000? And what was I doing there, really, trying to teach a few of them to write poems? Neruda's *Book of Questions* remains one I return to whenever I feel bewildered by the world, and my place in it. Lines like "Will our life not be a tunnel between two vague clarities?" or "Where can you find a bell that will ring in your dreams?" serve to remind me of the necessary and portable quality of imagination. And while the residents of Dadaab receive life-saving assistance, they remain trapped by decades of -isms: colonialism, fundamentalism, globalism, and racism. Still, the voice of one girl transcended our dusty classroom when she wrote: Why do you think me a drop of water when my heart the endless sea?

She had a few questions for me too. "Tell me about your dreams," she said. "Why are you a poet, and what can you, and this poetry, do for us?" I'd told the girl that I wasn't sure what I could do for them besides share what I loved, poetry, something that has always made me feel less alone in the world. I told them about reading Anna Akhmatova on a train across Russia. In her poem, "Requiem" a woman asks if Akhmatova can describe the terror of Stalin's prisons. "And I answered - 'I can.' It was then that something like a smile slid across what had previously been just a face." Everything in my being wanted to look away from the faces of Dadaab, and from all the obstacles facing the lively, smart, and determined students I met, especially the girls, who were outnumbered in the schools dozens to one, but I told them I would describe what I'd seen, and that I would try to help others better imagine their plight, and their spirits. And that they could, too. "Are you on Facebook?" one of the boys asked toward the end of class, reminding me that these were also just teenagers, stuck in a dry and dangerous corner of the world, looking for a few new friends. One girl wearing a full head covering and long blue robe sat in the back with her head lowered for most of the class, but she grinned and flashed a thumbs-up as she left, saying, "I'll see you in America." I don't know if she will, but I can see her now.